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Atari Online News, Etc.
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~ Yahoo Shuts Chat Rooms ~ People Are Talking! ~ PM Doom Updated!
~ Spain Busts 'P. Power' ~ File-Swapping To Stay? ~ NeoOffice/J For Mac!
~ Google Online Payments ~ Retro Challenge 2005! ~ Jack Kilby Dies
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-* eBay Encourages Seller Sites *-
-* Library Web Access Better Than Ever *-
-* Hotmail Takes Tougher Stance Against Spam! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

What a great week it's been! A nice golf tournament last weekend (nah, we didn't win!), nice seasonal weather all week, and vacation looming in the near future. This weekend is supposed to be hot, hazy, and humid - with the temps pushing 100. I guess I'll be spending a lot of time in the pool! I'm looking forward to this vacation! It's been quite awhile since I've taken any significant time off; I need to do some re-charging, and relax. So, other than regale about the weather and my pending vacation, I don't have a lot to say this week. It's been fairly quiet, so I'll let it stay that way.

Until next time...

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Retro Challenge 2005

Introduction

Do you depend upon modern computers, or are you a creative spirit who can push the limits of your old hardware in order to fulfill your everyday needs? The Retrochallenge is where you find out. This competition promotes the use of vintage hardware by establishing up three challenges. You are encouraged to enter any or all of theses challenges, to judge the creative works of other participants, or simply join in the discussions on our mailing list.

What are these challenges? If you enjoy creating original artwork, music, or programs on your legacy computer, then the creative challenges are for you. Simply do what you normally do, then submit your work to be judged by your peers. The second challenge is simply using a qualifying computer through the month of July, in a competition to see can survive a month without the latest in gadgetry. The third challenges judges how well you could communicate with the outside world on a retrocomputer.

So what is the prize? The excitement of participating in the challenge (everyone gets that one), and the respect of your peers. In order to help

you gain the recognition of your peers, MLAgazine has graciously offered to publish an article about the winner.

(68000 computers get a x3 modifier compared to the standard ’030 computers which will be a modifier of x1.)

     You think you got what it takes? :)

     Doctor Clu

--- BBBS/NT v4.01 Flag-5
 * Origin: FamilyNet Sponsored by http://www.christian-wellness.net (8:8/2)

pmdoom 0.40

Hello everybody,

I restarted from original Doom code, to have a cleaner base, than the current 0.31 which was going worse than ever. I also compiled it with a recent SDL version with many bug fixes.

Now, you have:

- Totally dynamic about resolution choice and changes, no more zoomed 320x200. You really can have Doom in 640x400 (or more). With the GEM video driver, you can change the window size, and the game follows.

- The engine always draw in 8 bits, then SDL convert it to the screen format. It should be faster in 8 bits mode with FastRam, because the screen is entirely built in Fast, then c2p-ized to STRam, so less bytes transferred from Fast to ST-Ram.

- Many memory leaks fixes with Valgrind/x86 under Linux.

For SDL, there is also support for Centscreen and Blowup resolutions, and current Screenblaster 3 mode, I need people to test them.

--
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Programmeur Linux, Atari
SpØcialitØ: DØveloppement, jeux

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, another week has slipped by, and

it’s time to take a look at UseNet messages again.

I know that I almost always end up talking... ranting, actually... about something other than Atari, but hey, Atari hasn’t made a computer in years and other than niche market machines and a few ingenious add-ons, there really isn’t a hell of a lot to talk about. But this week I’m going to mention a couple of things Atari-related.

First of all, I want to relate to you a quick story that a friend related to me.

This friend told me that his town had an ’computer round-up’ last week. The idea is that you can bring all of your old computers and monitors and dispose of them. They don’t like it when you throw monitors and stuff with lead-bearing solder in the trash anymore. So they have these pickups from time to time so that everybody’s happy.

Well, he had a non-functioning 520ST and a MegaSTE that had been taking up space for long enough so, with tears in his eyes, he decided that it was time to get rid of them.

Unfortunately, he was unable to bring them to the collection site and his wife quickly agreed to do him a ’favor’ and drop them off.
Well, she got there and brought the two computers up to whoever it was that drew the short straw and had to deal with the public.

"I’m sorry," he told her, "we’re not taking video games today".
At a loss as to what to do next, she piled the computers back into the car and brought them back home.

My friend was a bit relieved when he returned home from work and saw his old computers sitting there on the table, since he’d been feeling pangs of remorse all day, and asked, "why didn’t you bring those to the recycling center"?

She related the story about their strict prohibition against video games. After having dealt with the stigma of Atari computers being "game machines" for years, he finally felt it was time to cut loose. "THEY’RE NOT GAMES, DAMNIT! THEY’RE COMPUTERS! COMPUTERS, DO YOU HEAR ME!"

I laughed my butt off when he told me the story, simply because I can remember being in that situation so many times. Yeah, that was years ago, but the old feelings still exist. As a matter of fact, every time I see an ad for the latest incarnation of Atari. Yep, these days Atari is indeed ’games’.

When I think of the innovation that Atari brought to the computer market, I often wonder why it stopped. After all these years, I’ve gotten no closer to a satisfying answer, but I think it’s probably because Atari never really saw the "whole picture". They made a butt-kicking machine, but did it by locking themselves into a design. Then instead of innovating again, they simply dropped the price. Then they dropped it again.

Now, I’m as in favor of lowering prices as anyone else, but when the Atari 520ST made its debut, it was ground-breaking technology. The critics were in awe, the competitors were envious, and the public was enthralled. But after several years it was dated technology. The rest of the computer world had caught up. It didn’t matter how inexpensive

the computers were now, there were too many other options out there. There was one thing in Atari's favor, however. Their computers had a.... well, a personality. I've used a bunch of computers over the years, and I have yet to encounter another computer that I feel the connection to like I did with each of my STs. I know it's not scientific, hell, it's not even something that I can put my finger on, but the Atari had a personality. It wasn't just balancing my checkbook or chatting online or playing games, it was special in some indefinable way.

Well, I've stayed away from politics and religion for about as long as I can, so let's get right to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari NewsGroup

Hallvard Tangeraas asks for volunteers to translate German text:
"A couple of others along with myself are looking into how to upgrade the Mega STe with a HD floppy drive among other things. I found some tips and information about this issue in the German "Chips'n chips version X" Hypertext (HYP) file.

(by the way, I've just uploaded that file (which contains a wealth of hardware information for all Atari ST computers) and it can be found here: ftp://gem.win.co.nz/hall/info/chips_x.zip)

Anyway, since my German (and especially technical-German) isn't that good I could need some help in understanding what it says.
I've tried a rough word-by-word translation using Altavista's online translation service, but there are still quite a few things I don't understand.

Can someone out here help?

Thanks :-)

Here's that text:

---------- START ----------
Trotz HD-Laufwerk und Floppycontroller will der Rechner nicht?

Es gibt insgesamt drei Boardlayouts vom MegaSTE, diese sind nicht alle vom Werk aus HD-Diskettenlaufwerk-tauglich!
Hier ein Auszug aus der "Einbauanleitung f•‹r das HD-Floppy Upgra- de Kit" von ATARI:

AUSZUG Start

Beim MEGA STE muss noch •‹berpr•‹ft werden, ob eine Verbindung von U7 (68000 CPU) Pin 32 zu UA02 (PAL20L8) Pin 19 besteht. Falls nicht, bitte auf der Board-Unterseite einen kurzen Draht einl•…ten. Ausser- dem muss das IC UA02 die Bezeichnung C301901-002 aufgedruckt haben. Falls Sie ein IC mit der Bezeichnung C301901-001 eingebaut haben, muss dieses ausgetauscht werden. AUSZUG Ende

Anmerkung des Autors:

Wer zu faul ist, die Platine auszubauen, kann auch eine Draht- br•‹cke von Pin 19 UA02 zu Pin 10 U8 (Cache Ram) ziehen. Kommt genau das gleiche bei raus, hat aber den Vorteil, dass die Platine nicht ausgebaut werden muss. Den PAL-Chip MUSS man aber zwingend ersetzen, wenn ein C301901-001 PAL Baustein vorhanden ist!

Es ist egal, ob der Rechner einen DMA-Chip in 40 Pin Dil-Ausf•‹hrung oder in 44 Pin PLCC-4Ausf•‹hrung hat, die obengeschriebenen Massnahmen m•‹ssen auf alle F•-lle beachtet werden! Das Pal geh•…rt(e) zum Lieferumfang des Original HD-Floppy Upgrade Kit (incl TOS 2.06, AJAX Chip und EPSON SMD340 Floppy)

Wenn die 1.44MB Floppy nicht zuverl•-ssig durchformatiert, kann es am Netzteil des Computers liegen. Die Partnummer muss mit -002 enden. Wenn es ein -001 Netzteil ist, muss die mittlere Platinen- Schraube entfernt werden. Ausserdem muss der Stehbolzen, in den die Schraube gedreht war, gegen die Platine isoliert werden. Klingt zwar alles merkw•‹rdig, ist aber tats•-chlich so. Bei der Gelegen- heit kannst du auch gleich nachsehen, ob der "richtige" Optokopp- ler SHARP PC111 eingebaut ist. Wenn es ein CNY17 ist, kann der Bildschirm ein wenig flimmern.

2 Floppylaufwerke am internen Steckverbinder zu betreiben ist ganz einfach. Einfach das Laufwerk mit einer neu aufpressten Buchse am Floppykabel verbinden und korrekt(!) auf Driveselect B jumpern (ein- stellen) oder die Driveselect Jumper ver•-ndern. Wird ein PC Floppykabel verwendet welches 4 um 180 Grad gedrehte Adern aufweisst m•‹ssen beide Floppylaufwerke auf Driveselect 1 (also B) gejumpert werden, sofern die Laufwerke da mitspielen. Wenn es probleme gibt, muss das Kabel auf nichtgedrehte Buchsenbelegung durch aufsetzen einer neuen Buchse modifiziert werden!

Muss der Blitter aus irgendeinem Grund ausgebaut werden (nur dann wenn der Blitter (U205) eh gesockelt ist), m•‹ssen hinterher die L•…tl•…cher der Widerst•-nde R224 und R225 mit Drahtbr•‹cken oder Null-Ohm Wider- st•-nden gebr•‹ckt werden. Speicherm•-ssig ist ein MegaSTE ohne gr•…ssere Umbauten bis auf 4 Mega- byte aufr•‹stbar. Mehr Speicher geht nur mittels der FRAK und der PAK3 Beschleunigerkarte oder •‹ber die anfang Oktober 1997 erschie- nene MagnumSTE Karte f•‹r alle MegaSTE Computer.
---------- END ---------- "

Peter West jumps in and saves the day when he posts:

"DDP Translations to the rescue! :-) I've left in the original German, but you may find it easier to read if you delete all lines starting with the quote chevron. [Editor's note: we've done that for you]

Despite HD drive and floppy controller, the computer doesn't want to know?

In total there are 3 board layouts of the MegaSTE, not all of

which are HD floppy drive capable ex-works.

Here an excerpt from the "Installation for the HD floppy upgrade kit" from ATARI:

EXCERPT Start

With MEGA STE you still have to check whether a connection exists from U7 (68000 CPU) pin 32 to UA02 (PAL20L8) pin 19. If not, please solder in a short wire on the underside of the PCB (printed circuit board). In addition the UA02 IC has to have the legend C301901-002 printed on it. If you have a built-in IC with the legend C301901-001, then this has to be substituted.

EXCERPT End

Note by the author:

If you are too lazy to remove the PCB, you can also draw a wire bridge from pin 19 UA02 to pin 10 U8 (Cache Ram). This has exactly the same result, but has the advantage that you do not have to remove the board. However it is ESSENTIAL to replace the PAL chip if a C301901-001 PAL IC is present!

It is immaterial whether the computer has a DMA chip in 40-pin DIL format or 44-pin PLCC format, the arrangements described above must be followed in each case! The PAL belongs(ed) to the package of the original HD floppy upgrade kit (inc. TOS 2.06, AJAX chip and EPSON SMD340 Floppy).

If the 1.44 MB floppy does not format reliably all the way through, then this could be due to the power supply unit of the computer. The part number must end with -002. If it is a -001 power supply, then the central PCB-mounting screw [presumably of the power supply board - Translator] must be removed. In addition the pillar into which the screw fitted has to be insulated from the PCB. Although all this sounds strange, it is really the case. While you are at it, you can check whether the "correct" opto-coupler SHARP PC111 is present. If it is a CNY17, the screen may flicker a little.

It is simple to connect two floppy drives to the internal push-on connector. Just connect the drive with a new socket pressed onto the floppy cable and set the jumper on the drive correctly (!) to drive-select B, or alter the drive-select jumpers. If a PC floppy cable is being used that has four wires rotated through 180 degrees, then both floppy drives have to be jumpered to drive-select 1 (i.e. B), provided the drives go along with that. If there are problems with this, then the cable has to be modified to a non-rotated socket connection by fitting a new socket!
If the blitter has to be removed for some reason (only if the blitter (U205) is socketed in any case), then afterwards the solder holes of the resistors R224 and R225 have to be bridged with wire straps or zero-ohm resistors.

Memory-wise a MegaSTE can be upgraded without much work up to 4 Megabytes. More memory is only possible with the FRAK and the PAK3 accelerator card or the new MagnumSTE card for all MegasSTE computers that first appeared in October 1997.

---------- END ---------- "

Peter Feddersen asks for info help in identifying his CPU:

"I am investigating the opportunity to upgrade the 68000 CPU on my MegaSTe - but i cannot find it! Is it not in the same (large) shape and format as in a normal ST?

As for the HD disks i purchased the ED/HD interface hardware upgrade, containing both GAL and Clock crystal from www.wbsystemtechnik.de. However i have not had success in this project - probably because the manual is in german. The upgrade is complemented with a software disc, which, unfortunately, also seems rather undocumented.

In a another thread, somebody talks about a magic dip-switch to make everything work? Where is this?

Can anybody explain the function(s) of the jumpers located around the motherboard?"

Michael Schwingen tells Peter:

"No. It is a square 68-pin PLCC package, which is BTW clearly labeled as MC68000"

Hallvard Tangeraas adds:

"It’s a PLCC type (square shaped) IC as the one used in the STe. You’ll find it in front of the power supply. In my Mega STe it’s marked as follows, but I believe different variations of the 68000 were used: http://home.c2i.net/w-460389/mste_68000.jpg

As far as I know, such an upgrade is completely unnecessary for the Mega STe as it already has provisions for HD floppy drive support (but not ED -who uses that anyway?), though not all Mega STe machines have it enabled.

I have an older Mega STe which I want to use a HD floppy drive with. The drive has been modified for use in an STe for use with a HD/DD interface such as the one you have, but the Mega STe just doesn’t have the support for it yet.

From what I’ve read, if a Mega STe doesn’t already have a working HD floppy drive factory installed you have to:

1) buy a HD floppy drive of course. I’m not sure if just about any "standard" PC type HD floppy drive will work, or if it has to be (slightly) modified like mine if you don’t use the one that Atari put into Mega STe machine (I believe it was an Epson something).

2) get a PAL chip marked "C301901-002" replacing the "C301901-001" (note the suffix) which you most likely already have. It’s chip "UA-2" which you’ll find right in front of the power supply.

3) Don’t quote me on this as I’ve (hopefully correctly) translated this from German, using the information for the Mega STe (old board) section of the "Chips’n Chips version X" HYPertext file, but I believe the newer boards (*with* full HD floppy support, delivered with HD floppy drives from the factory) had a wire-trace between that PAL chip and the

68000 processor which wasn’t present on older boards, so a wire has to be soldered between pin 19 of the "UA-2" PAL chip, and pin 19 of the 68000 processor ("U-7" chip). But again, don’t quote me on this! I take no responsibility of fried or malfunctioning Mega STe boards!!!

4) Not to start that old discussion again, but *officially* you need to change the disk controller chip (I haven’t taken a note of the chip number, but you’ll find it underneath the ACSI/SCSI interface board on the rear-right hand side of the motherboard. Just remove the small board’s screw and unplug it from the multi-pin connector on the right hand side.

5) Officially from Atari, you need to replace the WD-1772 chip with an "AJAX" (I can’t remember the numbers on that chip, but that’s the nickname it has) which has been designed for the HD/ED modes. The WD-1772 was built to handle just the DD mode, but unofficially the WD1772-02-02 (not the suffix) has a higher tolerance than other WD-1772 versions, and many people here have reported it running fine in HD mode as well as DD mode.

6) If you want to add a "High density" option in addition to "Single sided" and "Double sided" format options when choosing to format a floppy disk from the TOS desktop, you need to flip up the number 7 DIP switch (you’ll find an 8 switch DIP block, which is red in my machine) close to the TOS ROM/EPROMs in the front-right hand side area of the motherboard.

I assume you mean the DIP switch I just mentioned. It has nothing to do with enabling or disabling HD floppy support. It just gives you an extra format option. By flipping the switch ON you will get that option in the format window even if you don’t have a HD floppy drive, the correct PAL chip or anything else related to HD floppy support! Of course it won’t format the floppy drive to HD standards.

I think a few of the jumpers are explained in the "Chips’n chips X" HYPertext file. It’s a HUGE HYP file, and you probably need a 4 Mbyte machine to run it, but I’ve also read it using a couple of free Atari ST emulators in Windows ("GEMulator 2000" and "STEem engine", the latter being the best one in my opinion).

I have the file here, so if it can’t be found elsewhere I’ll see about uploading it (not sure if I have enough disk space, but we’ll see). I’ve just made a photo available, showing the location of the various ICs concerning the HD floppy drive and the other Mega STe stuff that I’ve discussed in different threads lately.

Take a look here: http://home.c2i.net/w-460389/mste_overview.jpg "

Greg Goodwin posts this interesting tidbit:
"From...

http://desnoyers.org/retroch allenge/

Introduction

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(68000 computers get a x3 modifier compared to the standard ’030 computers which will be a modifier of x1.)"

Well folks, that’s it for this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Magna Carta: Tears of Blood!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""" The Brain and Violent Games!
  Scooby-Doo! Unmasked!
  And more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Magna Carta: Tears of Blood Coming This Fall To Playstation 2

A man who despises the Yason...

A woman who loves all living creatures...

Migration to a New Land

600 years ago, a strange disease spread across the land, turning its victims into stone. A war ensued, raging for several hundred years and continuing to this day. Tired of the fighting, one group set sail in hopes of finding a new place to live. After countless weeks at sea, the four boats landed on the continent of Efferia. The immigrants saw that the land had been blessed by nature, and so they decided to settle there and begin a new life-a fresh start for those who had lost faith in humanity.

In Efferia, there was a race-the Yason-that closely resembled humans. Though not narrow-minded, they were not prepared to welcome these new settlers with open arms. The Yason and the humans maintained a respectable distance from each other, and went on with their daily lives. Though as time passed, they began to intermingle. However, the human population expanded rapidly, and marginalized the Yason. The Yason’s hatred for humans grew until war finally erupted. Initially, the humans had the advantage because of their experience with war. But, before long, the physically superior Yason had turned the tables. After 30 years of fighting, the possibility for a peaceful resolution had vanished.

Calintz, the leader of a small, elite mercenary unit, the "Tears of Blood," took up arms to avenge the destruction of his home. To end the war, the humans mounted a massive attack on the Yason’s base, and Calintz’s team participated. But, once the fighting began, Calintz ran into Reith, who had lost her memory. Was it fate that brought them together?

Could this chance encounter somehow change the future for all of Efferia?

FEATURES:

* A 50+ hour fantasy that unfolds through amazing CGI cut-scenes and fully voiced dialogue.
* Unlock the secrets of the Carta System and unleash spellbinding magical fury!
* Character designs by renowned Korean Artist, Hyung Tae Kim bring the world of Efferia to life!
* Unique real-time battle system allows you to position yourself anywhere on the battlefield!

Scooby-Doo! Unmasked

In this action adventure platform game, players will assume the role of Scooby-Doo as he and the teenage sleuths of Mystery Inc. visit Fred’s cousin Jed, a monster movie set designer. They’ll find Jed has disappeared and his animatronics are out of control, sending mechanical monsters haywire and making Jed the prime suspect.

Players must stop the creepy costumed characters, unmask the truth and prove Jed’s innocence. Scooby will be able to don Kung Fu, bat and archer costumes so that he can karate chop, glide and aim plungers at monsters.

The game consists of three sprawling worlds that each feature multiple levels and mini games with numerous cut scenes and climactic boss battles. Players will recognize the voice of the original Batman television series’ Adam West as Winslow Stanton, the game’s main villain, as well as authentic Scooby-Doo! cartoon voice actors. In addition, effects from the original cartoon, such as canned laughter and classic catch phrases, have been incorporated into the game.

Brain Sees Violent Video Games As Real Life

The brains of players of violent video games react as if the violence were real, a study has suggested.

Klaus Mathiak at the University of Aachen in Germany studied the brain patterns of 13 men aged 18 to 26 who, on average, played video games for two hours a day.

Wired up to a scanner, they were asked to play a game involving navigating through a complicated bunker, killing attackers and rescuing hostages.

Mathiak found that as violence became imminent, the cognitive parts of the brain became active and that during a fight, emotional parts of the brain were shut down.

The pattern was the same as that seen in subjects who have had brain scans during other simulated violent situations.

It suggests that video games are a "training for the brain to react with this pattern," Mathiak says.

The research was presented at a meeting in Canada and reported by New Scientist magazine.

Whether violent videos make people more aggressive though is hard to prove, the magazine noted. Studies have suggested players of violent games are in fact more aggressive but have left open the question of whether the games made them that way.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
"""""""""""""""""""""

Byte Junkies Looking for a Thrill? Come and Get Your Game On! Fossil and Atari Team Up to Combine Atari’s Classic Game Graphics With Fossil’s Watches

Fossil, Inc., a leader in design, development, marketing and distribution of contemporary, high quality fashion watches and accessories, and Atari, Inc., a leader in interactive entertainment, have joined forces to create a line of retro watches that will bring Atari’s signature game graphics to the wrist. The line will feature watches with a vintage style and graphics based on best-selling 80’s games such as Centipede, Breakout and Asteroids.

Atari recognized Fossil as one of the most innovative watch companies in the market and expects the combination of Fossil’s know-how and technology in watch making, along with the graphics from classic Atari video games,

to appeal to a wide range of consumers. Old school but for every generation, these Fossil watches are bursting with special effects.

"Fossil has worked closely with Atari, taking our current range of animated watches to the next level with the addition of Atari's vintage graphics," says Karen Schuback, Design Director of Fossil Watches. "As a company, Fossil is driven by the need to provide our customers with new and exciting products. We were immediately captivated by Atari's 80's-inspired graphics to deliver new watch faces incorporating features that our customers may be familiar with while capturing new customers who are interested in vintage graphics."

"We are excited to be working with Fossil to bring Atari's classic gaming icons to consumers," said Wim Stocks, Executive Vice President, Atari, Inc. "Few other brands have the ability to sell product, style and lifestyle. Atari is committed to 'mining the vault' for new revenue streams and innovative ways to bring its classic games and images to consumers."

The watches will be available on fossil.com, all Fossil stores nationwide, select department stores, jewelry stores and specialty stores and available worldwide this fall.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Google May Expand Into Online Payments

Hoping to build upon the power of its Internet leading search engine, Google Inc. is believed to be developing an online payment system that that would pose a stiff challenge to online auctioneer Bay Inc.'s industry-dominating PayPal service.

Industry analysts, merchants and investors were digesting reports Monday that the Mountain View-based company is testing a payment system - codenamed "Google Wallet" - in hopes of rolling out the service later this year.

Google declined to comment, but the company's silence didn't muffle the buzz about a service that would set up a showdown between two Internet powerhouses.

Investors, meanwhile, appeared to view Google as a formidable threat. Google's shares gained $6.40, or 2.3 percent, Monday to close at $286.70 on the Nasdaq Stock Market, where eBay's shares dropped 81 cents, or 2.1 percent, to finish at $37.24.

"It's definitely going to happen; too many people already know about it and are talking about it," said Chris Winfield, who follows Google's machinations closely as president of 10e20, a search engine marketing firm.

After talking to a variety of industry sources, American Technology Research analyst David Edwards also is convinced Google is developing its own payment system. He believes Google Wallet initially will be tied to Froogle, the search engine’s shopping comparison service.

Google conceivably could use a payment service in many other ways. For instance, the service might process the money that’s exchanged between the millions of merchants and Web sites participating in its online advertising network.

A payment service also could make it easier for Google to sell content through its search engine.

Google already has indicated it will charge visitors to view certain videos that will be indexed in its search engine. Some analysts also think a payment service would enable Google to charge a fee on behalf of publishers looking to cash in on copyrighted or subscription-only news articles.

"This is probably the biggest threat to PayPal that has come along so far," said Gartner Inc. analyst Avivah Litan.

PayPal spokeswoman Amanda Pires declined to comment Monday. "It’s pretty hard to talk about a product that doesn’t even exist yet."

The first hint of Google Wallet came in March when the company formed Google Payment Corp., according to documents filed in Delaware. In April, Google incorporated the same company in California.

If the payment-processing service materializes, it would herald a significant expansion for Google, which depends upon online advertising for virtually all of its revenue.

Google’s formula has been highly successful so far, generating a $369 million profit on sales of $1.26 billion during the first three months of the year. But the reliance on advertising has raised fears that Google is more vulnerable to a financial downturn other companies, such as Yahoo Inc., that have developed other revenue channels.

Launching a payment-processing service would help diversify Google because the company would collect a service fee for each transaction it helps complete.

A payment service also might give Google more insights into accountholder buying habits - an advantage that theoretically could be used to do a better job of delivering relevant ad links that would be more likely to be clicked upon to generate more profits.

Although it ranks among the most potent companies on the Internet, Google’s expansion into payment processing wouldn’t be easy, largely because PayPal has such a huge head start in the field.

Since starting in 1999 with just 24 users, PayPal has grown to 72 million accountholders. The service processed payments totaling $6.2 billion during the first quarter, with 71 percent of the activity occurring in eBay’s online auctions.

The service is becoming an increasingly important source of revenue for San Jose-based eBay, which bought PayPal for $1.3 billion in 2002.

PayPal generated $233.1 million, or 23 percent, of eBay’s revenue during

the first quarter.

While dueling with PayPal, Google probably would have to spend heavily to combat fraud - a chronic problem for payment processing systems.

"If they don’t have a good job fighting fraud, Google will lose money on this," Gartner’s Litan said.

Other companies have tried to branch into online payments with little or no success. Sunnyvale-based Yahoo, for instance, ran a service called PayDirect to handle transactions on its auction site, but shut down that free service last year.

AOL Takes Bold Step: Content’s Now Free

The walls guarding America Online’s proprietary content quietly started to crumble this week as the company placed most of its news, sports, chats and other features on the open Internet. That’s the culmination of AOL’s 18-month-old plan to vie head-on with Google, Yahoo and Microsoft as an advertising-driven Web portal. The new strategy is a bid to offset the loss of millions of subscribers.

As part of a test, online users now can access a Web version of AOL’s trademark welcome screen and menu of content channels by going to AOL.com and clicking on a link called "AOL.com Beta Test." Over the summer, AOL plans to move the programming directly to AOL.com. "Very quietly, the walled-garden era has ended," AOL Chief Jonathan Miller said after meeting with USA TODAY’s editorial board.

AOL is still the No. 1 Internet service, but its subscriber base has fallen to 22 million from 26 million two years ago as customers continue to defect to cable and DSL broadband providers or discount dial-up services. To stem the bleeding, the Time Warner unit has remade itself as a top broadband content company by offering exclusive music concerts and videos, movie trailers, news clips and sports highlights. But just 5 million subscribers shell out $14.95 a month for AOL’s content in addition to a separate cable or DSL broadband fee.

So Miller decided to unleash AOL’s morsels to the world and try to reap the benefits of an ad boom that has buoyed Google, Yahoo and Microsoft. "It stares you in the face," Miller says. "Our competitors are doing great on the Web."

AOL’s flagship service and top Web sites such as Moviefone, Mapquest and Netscape reached the $1 billion ad-revenue milestone last year, placing AOL behind only Yahoo, Google and Microsoft. But without its new Web strategy, AOL would continue to lose market share to those portals, Miller says.

AOL, he contends, can stand out with its music and video offerings. Since AOL put its music content on the Web in November, monthly visitor totals have jumped from about 15 million to 24 million.

To drive traffic to AOL.com, the company will place links on its popular AIM instant-messaging service, Moviefone and other sites. It also has replaced its proprietary programming language with the Web language HTML and embedded computer code on its pages so they will be called up by search engines.

Miller concedes that the change could accelerate subscriber losses. But he says few members cite content as a drawing card. And key features, such as AOL email addresses and parental controls, will still be available to subscribers only.

"It’s not going to be easy for AOL to keep up with Yahoo and MSN," says JupiterResearch analyst David Card. But, "It’s a smart strategy."

EBay Encourages Sellers to Build Web Sites

Eager to find new sources of income and keep its sellers from striking out on their own, eBay Inc. launched a new service Thursday that encourages small- and medium-sized sellers to build Web stores that operate independent of the e-commerce powerhouse.

EBay’s new ProStores service will allow sellers to design their own fixed-price e-commerce site with a unique Web address. The service, which costs $6.95 per month with fees ranging from .5 percent to 1.5 percent of transactions, will allow users to link their custom-built site to their eBay site and use PayPal, eBay’s popular online transaction service.

The move comes as year-over-year revenue growth slows in the company’s core auction format - particularly in the United States and Germany, where eBay’s market penetration is nearing saturation. The San Jose-based company has been aggressive about expanding into emerging markets such as China and India, but it also has experimented with online classified advertisements, real estate and other new business ventures to try to maintain double-digit revenue increases in the lucrative e-commerce markets of North America and western Europe.

For several years, eBay employees have been charged with expanding the company beyond online auctions - including creating services that transform eBay into a sort of consulting service for small business owners looking to build their e-commerce presence, said Michael Dearing, eBay senior vice president and general merchandise manager.

About one in three of eBay’s largest sellers - such as people who sell entire lines of discontinued clothes from China and computer vendors who sell millions of dollars worth of equipment each month - operate their own e-commerce stores. But more than 100,000 smaller sellers, who hawk everything from handmade sweaters to Pez dispensers, often don’t have sites other than their eBay store, Dearing said.

"We are all about helping sellers succeed online, and we’re building products and services to help them do that," Dearing said. "The marketplace will continue to be a foundation for a long time, but we know that sellers are interested in finding buyers all over the place and this can help them do that.

The new service comes about a half-year after the San Jose-based company enraged many small-scale sellers with a hefty price hike that threatened to dent their profits. In mid-January, eBay warned sellers in a terse e-mail that the monthly subscription fee for people who operate "Basic eBay Stores" would increase from $9.95 to $15.95, and the fee for a standard listing of 10 days would double, from 20 cents to 40 cents.

Also on Thursday, CEO Meg Whitman said the company, which ended 2004 with net income of $778.2 million and cash reserves of $1.33 billion, may offer a dividend or repurchase some shares. Like many Silicon Valley technology companies, 10-year-old eBay has never paid a cash dividend, preferring instead to reinvest profits on research and development, marketing promotions and other business expenses.

"We aren't averse to returning cash to shareholders when we think we have a strategic reserve," Whitman said to about 100 shareholders who gathered in San Jose for an annual meeting. "But you have to be thoughtful of what you communicate when you do that."

Whitman also brushed aside concerns of one shareholder, who worried about the company's sliding stock price. EBay shares have declined 40 percent from a 52-week high in December, trading at $35.63 Thursday on the Nasdaq Stock Exchange.

"We're bullish about the long term for the company," Whitman said. "Is the stock market efficient day to day, week to week? Probably not."

Samsung Has Big Plans for Flash Drives

Samsung Electronics hopes that falling prices for flash memory chips will mean solid-state memory can eventually replace hard drives in laptop computers and other devices, a top executive says.

The South Korean company recently made its first step towards this goal with the announcement of a prototype 16GB drive based on flash chips.

Flash memory has several advantages over hard-disk drive storage: it consumes less power, it has higher resistance to shock, it's more reliable because there are no moving parts, it can read and write data faster, and it's silent in operation. But there's a major hurdle to mass-market adoption: it's much more expensive.

Samsung is betting that price difference will erode if double-digit percentage price drops in the flash memory market continue and so the market for flash-based storage will broaden, says Hwang Chang-Gyu, president and CEO of Samsung's semiconductor business. He spoke to reporters in a briefing at the company's main chip production complex in Giheung, South Korea, south of Seoul.

Hwang cites flash memory price drops of around 40 percent in the last year as evidence that flash is quickly getting much cheaper.

"This will be big once people enjoy how much faster and convenient it is to use solid-state disks rather than hard-disk drives," Hwang says. "We're starting with 16GB and expanding to 100GB in a couple of years."

Samsung hasn't announced the price of the 16GB drive yet, but the target markets for the product - military and industrial computing - are typically willing to pay a premium for technology. The drive is packaged in a case the same size as a 2.5-inch hard drive so it can be used as a direct replacement for these drives. Samsung has also announced 8GB and 4GB versions that will be a similar size to 1.8-inch drives.

The company has good reason to be championing flash memory. It's the

world’s number one producer of flash chips with revenue more than double that of second-ranked Intel, according to iSuppli. In contrast it ranked fifth in market share in the hard drive market in 2004, according to IDC.

Coming Soon: MS Office Alternatives for Mac

Major milestones were recently announced for two Mac OS X-compatible software suites that could provide an alternative to the near-ubiquitous Microsoft Office. The free NeoOffice/J, an open-source software development project created by Patrick Luby and Edward Peterlin, has reached its "first stable release," and South Korea-based Haansoft has announced that it will ship a Mac OS X version of its ThinkFree Office 3.0 suite close on the heels of the July release of the Windows version.

NeoOffice/J 1.1 represents the first "final" release of the office suite, which includes a word processor, spreadsheet and presentation software, and a drawing application. It also offers improved text handling and bug fixes to the earlier Final Candidate release.

According to its creators, NeoOffice/J is compatible with most Microsoft Office files. Unlike some open-source office suites, NeoOffice/J users can drag and drop as well as copy and paste data to and from other applications.

In addition, NeoOffice/J uses a standard Mac OS X installer, presents native Aqua menus, does not require Mac OS X users to install and use X11 software, uses Mac OS X fonts and has native printing support.

However, "NeoOffice/J is not perfect," the developers caution on their Web site. Support options consist of perusing online forums, such as NeoWiki and Trinity Forums. This has long been a barrier to corporate adoption, as many companies prefer to work with software companies that can offer support contracts.

NeoOffice/J, which is based on the OpenOffice.org code base, is distributed under the GNU GPL (General Public License), which means that users can freely create and share copies as long as they include the source code. In addition, users are encouraged to make and contribute changes, as long as these are, in turn, released to the public under the same GPL terms.

In contrast, the ThinkFree Office 3.0 suite will not be free, though it will not cost nearly as much as Microsoft’s product; Haansoft has not released final pricing, but the current version of the suite is available for $49.95.

According to Haansoft press releases, ThinkFree Office 3.0’s main advance over Version 2.3 will be improved compatibility with Microsoft Office features and file formats.

ThinkFree Office includes the ThinkFree Write word processor, the ThinkFree Calc spreadsheet application and the ThinkFree Show presentation application.

Haansoft also publishes Hangul 2005 and Hancom Office 2005, which are popular word processing and office applications in South Korea.

Library Internet Access Better Than Ever

Virtually every U.S. public library now offers free Internet access but most ration it, inhibiting the ability of lower-income families to benefit from the Information Age.

Libraries in Fresno County, Calif., impose a half-hour limit during peak periods, but one branch reported that patrons needed two hours or more of computer time just to fill out online job applications for a new Home Depot store.

Typically, two to seven people are waiting for a computer to become free at the main library.

Time limits mean "people can't get to the things that are important to them," said Karen Bosch Cobb, Fresno's interim chief librarian. "People are doing grant applications, scholarship, reading their e-mail," she said, while immigrants use the Internet to stay in touch with relatives abroad via e-mail and read news about their native countries.

In a study released Thursday, the American Library Association said 99.6 percent of libraries are now connected to Internet, with all but a handful offering access to the public. That compares with 20.9 percent in 1994 when the study was first conducted.

"If you look at some of these numbers, some people might have a tendency to say, 'My gosh, they are connected. They are doing all these things. They don't need help anymore,'" said John Bertot, the Florida State University professor who directed the study. "That has me concerned. Public libraries do still need help."

For the first time, libraries were asked about their ability to meet demand. Seventy percent of libraries said there aren't enough computer terminals during peak periods, while another 16 percent said there's always a shortage.

Shortages are most common in high-poverty and urban areas, the study found.

The El Paso, Texas, library system tripled the number of computers to nearly 300 "and we still can't keep up," said Carol Brey-Casiano, the library director and ALA president. "It seems like the more we add, the more computers we need."

Two-thirds of American adults now use the Internet, according to a March survey from the Pew Internet and American Life Project. But the U.S. Commerce Department found in 2003 that 14 percent of Internet users, including children, have no access at home and depend on libraries, school or work.

"While most of America's middle class has Internet access at home, there's still a digital divide among low-income citizens, people with limited education, ethnic minorities and other groups," said Andy Carvin, an expert in improving access to technology and the Internet.

Carvin is particularly concerned about lines and time limits, saying it's not always reasonable to simply ask patrons to come back.

"For students, they have a limited turnaround time to conduct research or

do homework," Carvin said. "For many low-income residents working multiple jobs just to make ends meet, they lack the flexibility to come during low-use hours."

The ALA study also found that while most libraries offer training, they tend to be ad-hoc - librarians offering individual assistance whenever they have time. Only 28 percent offer regularly scheduled classes - 16 percent in rural areas.

Forty-two percent of libraries have high-speed connections, but only 34 percent of rural libraries, compared with 73 percent in urban areas.

"If you limit people to a half hour, and they are trying to download large files (over a dial-up modem), chances are your time is going to be up before you can do it," Bertot said.

While some libraries reported funding constrains, space is what prevents others from offering more Internet terminals. Unable to expand, the library in Prairie du Chien, Wisc., installed Wi-Fi wireless access points so patrons can connect using their own laptops.

Overall, 18 percent of libraries offer wireless access and another 21 percent plan to do so within the next year.

But many people who depend on libraries for the Internet also do not own computers, let alone laptops.

The study, conducted with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and its library grants program, was based on questionnaires administered to a random sampling of the nation’s public libraries from November to February.

Hotmail Takes a Tougher Stance on Spam

Microsoft is throwing the full weight of Hotmail behind its Sender ID e-mail authentication technology by sidelining incoming mail when it fails to pass a Sender ID check.

The software maker has begun warning Hotmail users with an on-screen alert when the sender of an incoming e-mail cannot be verified using its Sender ID Framework. Mail that fails to pass the test will be placed in a junk mail folder or could even be deleted, according to Craig Spiezle, director of Microsoft’s Technology Care and Safety Group.

Spiezle laid out the changes in an interview posted on Microsoft’s Web site this week. Microsoft is pushing Sender ID as a system for identifying and thwarting unwanted e-mail. The technology works by verifying that e-mails originate from the domain from which they claim to have been sent. It checks the sending server’s address against a registered list of servers that the domain owner has authorized to send e-mail.

By making all mail received by Hotmail go through the Sender ID check, Microsoft is not only making a strong play for the technology but also pushing ISPs and other businesses to publish their sender policy framework (SPF) records so that their mail does not get quashed. Hotmail reserves the right to delete mail based on antispam and antiphishing heuristics and on the sender’s reputation, Spiezle says. He did not say how reputations are assessed.

Organizations should publish their SPF records to "protect their domain and ultimately enhance their brand name," he says.

Microsoft is not the only major technology player promoting an antispam technology. Yahoo has an authentication technology called DomainKeys, and IBM has rolled out a new antispam technology called FairUCE, or Fair use of Unsolicited Commercial E-mail.

Yahoo licenses out DomainKeys, and recently said it is working with Cisco Systems to combine their antispam technologies and create a new authentication system. IBM is promoting its technology with developers, saying it wants to help them build more effective antispam filters.

Yahoo Shuts Chat Rooms Amid Child Sex Concerns

Yahoo Inc., the most-used Internet site, has shut down all its user-created Internet chat rooms amid concerns that adults were using the sites to try to have sex with minors.

The giant Internet media company closed down those chat rooms and the ability to create new ones "in the past week," said Yahoo spokeswoman Mary Osako.

Chat rooms created and sponsored by Yahoo itself remain open, Osako said. The number of user-created chat rooms is variable at any given time and Yahoo does not track that figure, she said.

The user-created chat rooms in question, where Internet users converse in real time, had names including "Girls 13 And Under For Older Guys" and "Girls 13 And Up For Much Older Men" and were all listed under "education chat rooms," Houston television station KPRC reported.

"We are working on improvements to the service to enhance users’ experience and their compliance with our terms of service," Osako said. "Yahoo condemns the use of Internet tools for illegal activities."

KPRC reported last month that major advertisers including PepsiCo Inc., Georgia-Pacific Corp. and State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. removed their ads after the station found the ads were appearing on Yahoo user-created chat rooms that were aimed at sex with children.

"As soon as we found out we pulled our ads," said Pepsi spokesman Dave DeCecco. "We were totally unaware our ads were associated with those chat rooms - and that was back in April."

Pepsi continues to advertise on other parts of Yahoo’s site, mostly in sports and music sections, but pulled all its ads in user-created chat rooms.

"They were down the same day we found out about it," DeCecco said, referring to the ads on user chat rooms.

"We were horrified to find out we were on those sites," said Georgia-Pacific spokeswoman Robin Keegan. "As soon as we found out, that day we pulled that advertising."

A spokesperson for State Farm was not immediately available to comment.

The concern over online safety for children using the Internet has surged with the number of people using the Internet, which allows for anonymous and sometimes hard-to-trace communication and content.

It’s also not the first time that Yahoo has faced the issue of users taking advantage of its free services to lure young children.

A minor and his parents in May filed a $10 million lawsuit against Yahoo and a man who once operated a Yahoo Groups site where members traded child pornography.

Many attorneys argue that the Communications Decency Act shields Web sites from responsibility for material posted by users.

But the lawsuit, filed on May 9 in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Texas, charged that Yahoo breached its duties by allowing co-defendant Mark Bates and others to share child pornography on a site, called Candyman, that Bates created and moderated via the Yahoo Groups service.

A child pornography investigation led by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and dubbed Operation Candyman targeted Yahoo Groups users and ultimately resulted in the arrest of more than 100 people in the United States.

Windows Minus Media Player Not Big Seller

In Microsoft’s new operating system - Windows XP N - the "N" stands for "Not with Media Player." But it might as well stand for "No Thanks." PC makers and distributors are holding back from buying the new alternative version of Windows XP that Europe’s competition commissioner ordered Microsoft Corp. to offer as part of the punishment in the software maker’s long antitrust battle with the European Union.

Windows XP N was released to distributors last week in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish and will be available to the public in the next few weeks. Versions in 10 additional languages will be released in July.

The world’s largest software maker had to change its Windows operating system after EU antitrust regulators ruled last year that it abusively wielded its Windows monopoly and locked out competitors. Microsoft was fined a record euro497 million ($608 million).

But computer distributors and manufacturers are so far showing little interest in the new product, which compels consumers to choose their media player and download it from the Internet.

And that raises questions over the effectiveness of the media player component of the antitrust ruling.

"We don’t see any interest at all in the product for the consumer," said Lionel Jarlan, computer buyer at France’s Fnac department store chain. Fnac will be testing the product in a limited range of stores. They are expecting a first delivery at the beginning of July.

Many stores say they will not bother stocking the product.

"We'll continue to sell the old version because it's obviously better value for our customers," said Gina Jones, spokeswoman for PC World, Britain's leading PC retailer.

Microsoft is offering Windows XP N for the same price as the standard version of Windows XP.

Spanish online computer store Publinet has not ordered the product.

"We'll first see how it sells. I heard that this version would be cheaper," said Jose Cabeza, technical director for Publinet. "If it isn't, logically the market will decide about it. I don't see why a client on the street would choose a lesser product."

Several PC makers said they had no plans to install the new version of Windows XP because they did not expect a demand for it.

"This comes down to resources in terms of changing over as well as little evidence from consumers asking for 'N' specifically," said Ken Chan, portables product manager for Toshiba.

Sony and Dell said they did not intend to install the new product in their computers.

"From our experience, customers purchasing computers expect them to come equipped with the capability of playing back digital media files," said Dell spokesman Liem Nguyen.

Changes to the version of Windows XP without Media Player came after EU regulators were not convinced the Windows version the company was forced to produce without Media Player was technically up to standard.

Microsoft and the EU are still negotiating its compliance with another EU order - that the company share Windows' source code with competitors who make server software so their products can better communicate with Windows-powered computers.

The EU can fine Microsoft up to 5 percent of its daily global sales for each day that a decision is not applied to the EU's satisfaction.

Microsoft initially wanted to call the new version of its consumer operating system "Windows XP Reduced Media Edition" but EU regulators said that name would discourage sales.

"We have made these products available to our standard distribution channels, as the EU commission outlined. Now its up to computer manufacturers, distributors and customers to decide whether to order the product," said Derek Delmartino, spokesman for Microsoft in Brussels. Sales could not be calculated for at least a month, he added.

Software buyers said clients for the new product would have to be extremely well-informed.

"I think they'll be a minority of clients, maybe product developers, but a minority who will buy the product," said Stefan Decque, a software buyer at Surcouf computer store in Paris.

Jarlan pointed out that it is easy to uninstall Media Player from the

complete version of Windows XP if clients want to avoid it.

"It’s a militant act for a customer to buy the new version," he said.

Sneak a Peek at the New AOL.com

AOL on Tuesday launched a beta version of its new free Web portal, designed to put the site on par with other Internet jack-of-all-trade sites like Yahoo.com and Microsoft’s MSN. A link on the AOL site will lead users to the new portal in progress.

"The new AOL.com is a next-generation portal that really begins to fulfill the promise of the Internet in terms of bringing real video assets to the users’ fingertips-users can actually consume things - it’s not a question mark as to whether this video will really play," AOL.com Vice President and General Manager David Liu said.

"Also, being able to have very timely programming-news and also the best of what’s happening on the Web-all in one place is really unique," he said.

The new site will offer features that were once only available to America Online Inc. subscribers, and several new extras-fulfilling the company’s ultimate goal of creating a hub where consumers can use AOL’s communication services and have easy access to news and information from a variety of sources, which will include partner Time Warner Inc.’s People, InStyle and Real Simple magazines.

The portal will also lead users to the widely used AOL Instant Messenger, the AOL Journals blogging service and the AOL Picture service for storing and organizing photos.

Aside from the polyglot of information and services, the real push seems to be to provide instant access to music and video to a degree not seen on the Web before.

The new site will have a comprehensive AOL Radio on demand with 200 channels, and after the beta-testing period ends, will also be host to 20 XM Radio channels. XM subscribers will, alternately, have access to over 90 satellite radio channels.

"It’s the best in class in terms of breadth of content and satellite radio, in addition to the fact that we’re always up-to-date in keeping the channels fresh," Liu said about the new AOL.com music features.

The existing AOL Session and Music Live programming will also be brought to the forefront. These have been a coup for AOL in terms of its connection to the industry and to consumers. Liu said after AOL made these programs available to non-subscribers the site’s traffic increased by 60 percent, and that most major musicians will cut a session or kick off a tour via AOL. Most recently, AOL Music Live aired video of Coldplay playing at NYC’s Beacon Theater.

For video, the company seems to be letting out all the stops. In addition to adding a Video Search to the site’s new search capabilities, visitors will eventually be able to access AOL’s new Video Hub to watch music videos, movie clips and trailers, full-length video features, news and live feeds from various outlets.

Users will also be able to watch a Web-only reality show titled "The Biz" in which AOL visitors can enter to become the head of their own record labels. All video will be delivered through a new AOL video player.

"Video on demand and video search are an important part of AOL.com's programming," an official company statement said. "Nowhere on the Web will consumers find a video and audio experience like the one that will be offered through the new AOL.com portal."

The new portal will also bring together AOL's disparate Web properties under an all-inclusive Search function, powered by Google. The site aims to make it easy for consumers to use AOL Yellow Pages, MapQuest, Moviefone.com, and travel search engine Pinpoint Travel.

It's been no secret that AOL has been losing a grip on subscribers, dropping from a high of 26.7 million subscribers in 2002 to 21.7 million at the end of March 2005. Arguably, the drop can be attributed to dial-up customers moving over to broadband, which AOL does not currently offer.

Earlier this month, the company laid off its message board administrators and moved its once-active message boards out of the limelight. Now, critics have said that with AOL focused on giving away its exclusive content to everyone on the Web, there will be less incentive to keep subscribers around.

On the upside for the company, online advertising has been booming. Reports say that in the first quarter of 2005, AOL's advertising revenue increased 45 percent, and its subscription intake fell 8 percent. With those figures in mind, it makes sense that the company has decided to decrease membership services and move to portal status, with an advertising model to keep things afloat.

"When we decided to go with the audience strategy, we had to be very clear about what members cared about and what they were paying for," Liu said. "Most said they weren't paying for content and were paying for connectivity and the bundled suite of features."

He added, "The new site brings a lot of what people are asking for today to the forefront - a timely site for all of the AOL portals that blends human programming with computer programming."

The test version of the new portal will not contain all of the planned features, but most of them will be rolled out over the next month. Liu said he expects the full site to launch at the end of July.

Spain Arrests Web Code-cracker "P. Power"

Spanish police said they had arrested "P. Power", one of the most renowned code-crackers on the Internet, following a nine-month inquiry.

Armed with a simple modem connection to the World Wide Web, a decrepit computer and standard software "P.Power" broke security codes and hacked his way into costly professional computer programmes, the interior ministry said.

Spanish authorities have not released the identity of "P. Power," known

only by his Internet pseudonym, but they did say he was a 26-year-old engineer.

After meticulously unassembling programmes, analysing their weak points and then stripping them of their protection, the hacker broadcast messages to the Internet saying that he was the unique code-cracker and was sending out the codes for free, according to the interior ministry.

The ministry added it was impossible to put a price on the damage caused to firms using the programmes pirated or how many Internet users had downloaded the codes for free.

Unlike code "crackers," web "hackers" break into protected programmes of organisations such as NASA, banks or the FBI.

File-Swapping May Be Here to Stay

Four years after it shuttered the original Napster with a legal assault, the recording industry is taking a different approach to online file-swapping: If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.

Recording companies have begun taking steps to legitimize the peer-to-peer technology that lets computer users share songs, video and other files with one another online.

However the U.S. Supreme Court rules in a file-swapping decision expected as early as Thursday, the technology appears irrepressible.

In the last few months, major record labels have signed licensing deals with companies working to field file-swapping services that would block unauthorized files from being traded online.

"There’s only two options here," said Michael Goodman, an analyst at The Yankee Group market research firm. "You either license it - and you find a way to license it and monetize it - or you don’t license it and it gets traded anyway."

Some 330 million tracks were purchased online last year from online stores such as Apple Computer Inc.’s iTunes. But around 5 billion were downloaded from free file-sharing networks, he said.

Meanwhile, recording companies have sued 11,700 computer users for file-swapping. Of those, 2,500 cases have been settled, typically for about $3,000 each.

The Supreme Court is considering whether companies behind unrestricted file-sharing services - Grokster and Morpheus - should be liable for copyright infringement. The case’s outcome could speed the way for licensed peer-to-peer services.

Even so, it remains to be seen whether those industry-endorsed alternatives can attract people who now tap open file-swapping networks using such programs as eDonkey, BitTorrent and Kazaa.

"When it comes down to it, why is somebody going to pay for something they can get for free?" said Mac Padilla, 21, a student who lives in Los Angeles.

The industry may know the answer at least in part as early as next month, when Peer Impact, one of the licensed file-swapping services, is slated to launch.

Its software can be used to find and purchase tracks from an initial catalog of a half-million songs from all the major labels, said Gregory Kerber, head of Saratoga Springs, N.Y.-based Wurld Media Inc., the firm behind the service.

After a user buys a song from Peer Impact, future buyers get it from that member - or others who have gotten it in the meantime - instead of from a central server. Users have to pay for each track they download, but sharing songs they've purchased from Peer Impact earns them credits they can spend on the service.

At launch, at least, Peer Impact will not let users share songs from their own collections.

Another company to sign licensing deals with major and independent record labels is Snocap Inc., which was founded by Napster creator Shawn Fanning.

The company's software is designed to track songs being swapped online and notify record labels when someone tries to share a song that hasn't been licensed for free distribution. Snocap also has a deal with file-sharing software maker Mashboxx to block unlicensed tracks from moving through its network.

Mashboxx is set to launch a beta test version next month, said Wayne Rosso, chief executive for the Virginia Beach, Va.-based company. Rosso, who once headed the company behind the Grokster file-swapping software, says Mashboxx users will be able to search for tracks across peer-to-peer networks, upload them and share those that are not restricted by record labels using Snocap's software.

Through Snocap, the labels will be able to assign usage rules for each track, deciding whether users on Mashboxx or other peer-to-peer networks can listen to a track a few times before they must purchase it, or what sort of copy restrictions each file will have, for example.

Rosso claims Mashboxx users will be able to swap millions of tracks - such as concert bootlegs and other recordings - on which record labels have not applied restrictions.

That would help unsigned bands that use peer-to-peer networks to build their audience and established acts like Wilco that encourage their audiences to record their concerts and share bootlegs.

"If the content is not identified and registered in the database, then we can't be held responsible for it," Rosso said. "It's highly unlikely that any Mashboxx user is going to be sued."

Still, Rosso adds, once a record label finds that a bootleg recording or other track is being swapped, it can move to restrict it from being shared - or set up limited listens before purchase.

Privately, record label executives say they remain circumspect over how a licensed peer-to-peer service would actually fare in the marketplace.

Mashboxx has yet to announce licensing deals with the major labels, though

it’s been reported that Sony BMG Entertainment has agreed in principle to license its music.

Meanwhile, Microsoft Corp. is testing file-sharing technology of its own that one day could be integrated in the company’s dominant Windows PC operating system.

The project, dubbed Avalanche, is supposed to improve on the speed of other file-sharing distribution systems, such as BitTorrent, while also preventing unlicensed content from being traded. For now, the company says it has no plans to release Avalanche or include it in future products.

If Microsoft develops its own peer-to-peer software, it could help boost the number of music fans using licensed file-sharing services, said Goodman, the Yankee Group analyst.

"They have the opportunity to integrate it into the operating system ... so you get large-scale adoption," Goodman said. "That would make it attractive to content companies."

Microchip Pioneer Jack Kilby Dies at 81

Nobel laureate Jack Kilby, whose invention of the integrated circuit ushered in the electronics age and made possible the microprocessor, has died after a battle with cancer. He was 81.

Kilby died Monday, according to Texas Instruments Inc., where he worked for many years.

Before the integrated circuit, electronic devices relied on bulky and fragile circuitry, including glass vacuum tubes. In the late 1950s, there was considerable interest - especially in the military - in making devices smaller.

Kilby’s fingernail-size integrated circuit, a forerunner of the microchip used in today’s computers, replaced the bulky and unreliable switches and tubes.

It was during his first year working at TI in Dallas in the summer of 1958 that Kilby set out on a course that would forever change how electricity is used to efficiently and reliably power everything from vacuum cleaners to supercomputers. Using borrowed equipment, he built the first integrated circuit in which all the components were fabricated in a single piece of semiconductor material half the size of a paper clip.

"TI was the only company that agreed to let me work on electronic component miniaturization more or less full time, and it turned out to be a great fit," Kilby wrote in an autobiography for the Nobel Committee in 2000, the year he won the prize for physics.

Today, integrated circuits can be found in all manner of digital devices, from TVs to microwave ovens. Sales of integrated circuits totaled $179 billion in 2004, supporting a global electronics market of more than $1.1 trillion, according to TI.

The contributions of Kilby - who also co-invented the handheld calculator - are hard to overstate, according to technology experts.

"Today’s trillion-dollar market for integrated circuit-based electronics is just the tip of the iceberg," inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil said. "The exponentially expanding powers of information technology are transforming every industry and facet of life from the making of music, the enhancement of human communication through the Internet, to our growing mastery of our own biology through computer-based simulation."

According to his 2000 Nobel citation, Kilby "laid the foundation of modern information technology."

"In my opinion, there are only a handful of people whose works have truly transformed the world and the way we live in it - Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, the Wright Brothers and Jack Kilby," TI chairman Tom Engibous said in a statement Tuesday. "If there was ever a seminal invention that transformed not only our industry but our world, it was Jack’s invention of the first integrated circuit."

Kilby’s more than 60 U.S. patents included one filed in 1959 for an integrated circuit made of the element germanium.

"It was kind of a string-and-chewing-gum gadget that just showed you could use semiconductors to make all the bits and pieces. But it was far from something that you could do on a practical basis," said Gordon Moore, who co-founded Intel Corp. in 1968 with Robert Noyce, an inventor who a few years earlier had received a patent for a similar but more complex circuit made of silicon while at Fairchild Semiconductor.

"Kilby may have built the first one," Moore said. "Noyce’s approach was how to do it on a practical basis. They really complemented one another."

Moore, who worked with Kilby over the years, said he admired Kilby’s creativity, inventiveness and modesty.

"He was always coming up with creative ideas. I remember way back before people considered it important, he was inventing a gadget that used silicon to turn solar energy into hydrogen. It was kind of ahead of the problems we are looking at now," Moore said.

After winning the Nobel, Kilby said of his invention, "I thought it would be important for electronics as we knew it then, but I didn’t understand how much it would permit the field to expand."

In 1970, in a White House ceremony, he received the National Medal of Science. In 1982, he was inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

Kilby spent his later years as a consultant to TI, working on industry and government assignments throughout the world. A few years ago, Dallas-based TI named a $154 million research and development complex in his honor.

Known by colleagues as a humble man of few words, the 6-foot-6 Kilby said he never craved fame or wealth.

"I think it just happened," Kilby said in a 2000 interview with The Associated Press. "It wasn’t deliberate. I didn’t say, ‘Inventors are nice and I want to be one.’ I just think if you work on interesting projects, invention is kind of a natural consequence."

Jack St. Clair Kilby was born in 1923 in Great Bend, Kan. His father was the owner of a small electric company, and Kilby became interested in radio

tubes while listening to big band radio in the 1940s. He earned degrees in electrical engineering from the universities of Illinois and Wisconsin, and began his career in 1947 with the Centralab Division of Globe Union Inc. in Milwaukee, developing ceramic-based, silk-screened circuits for electronic products.

Kilby is survived by two daughters, five granddaughters, and a son-in-law.

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